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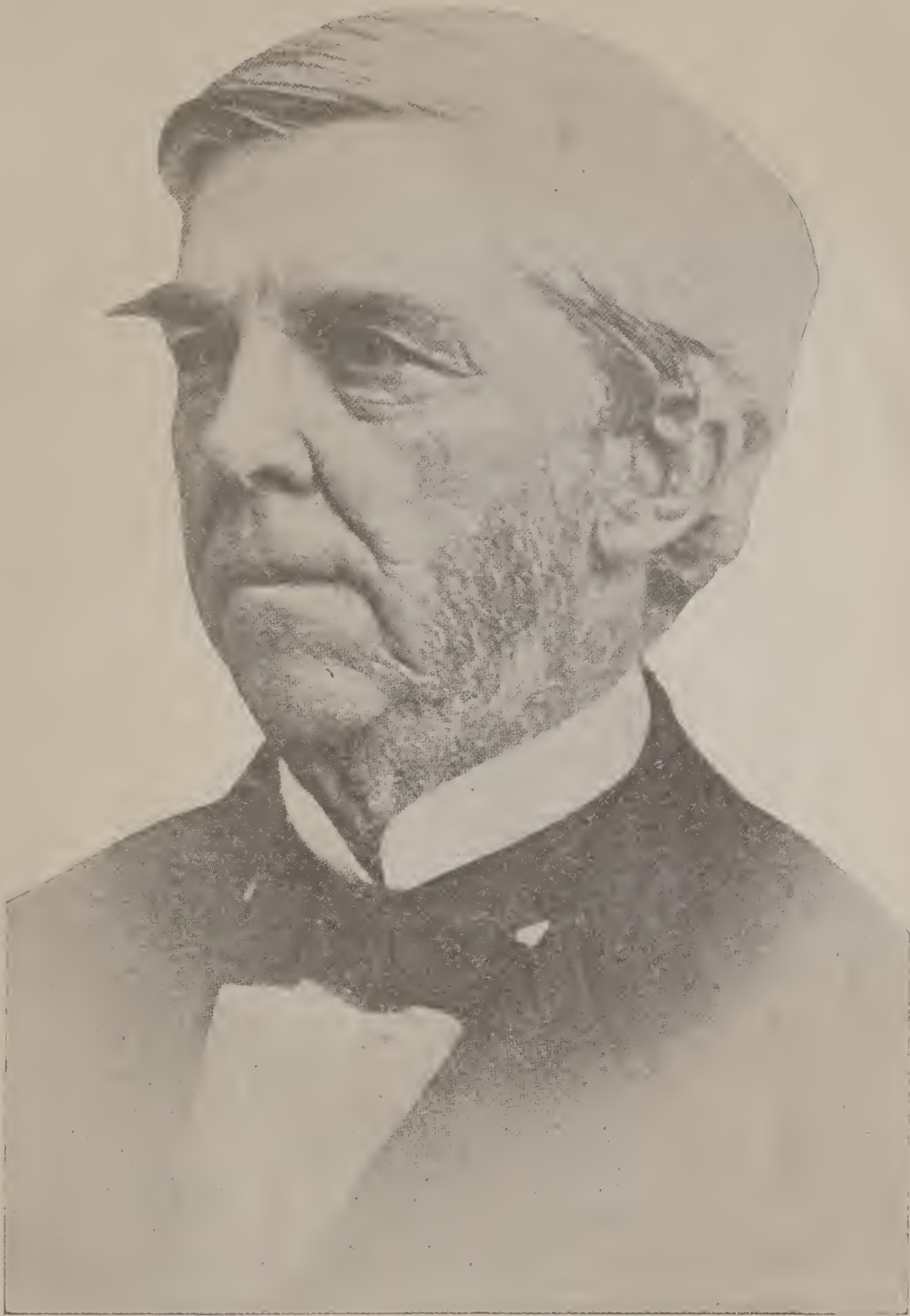
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The Chambered Nautilus

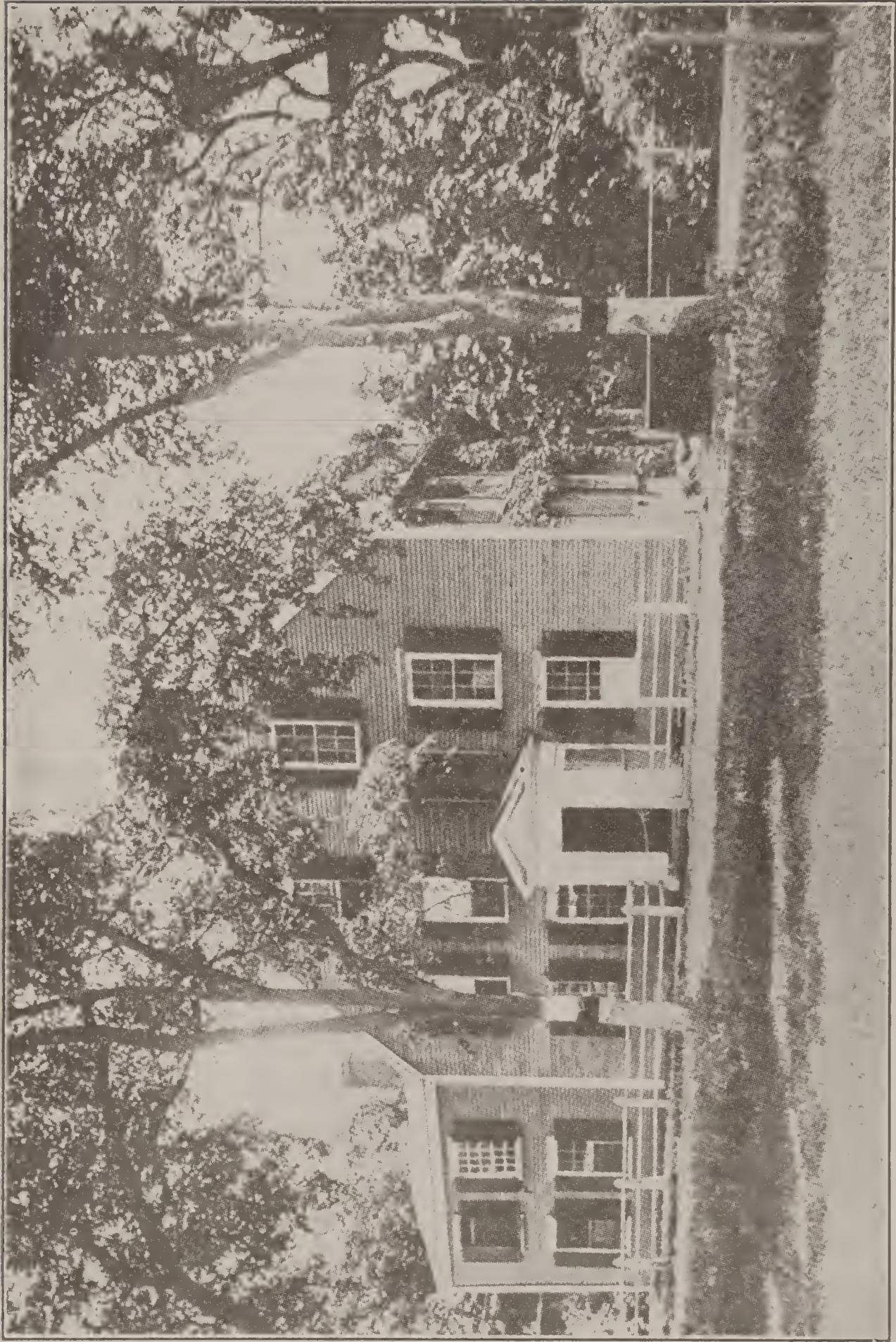
by Oliver Wendell Holmes



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U. S. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE
AUG 27 1920

STATE OF MICHIGAN
Department of Public Instruction
LANSING

Lansing, June 1, 1918.

The Department of Public Instruction issues this bulletin to serve as a help to teachers and pupils in the study of *The Chambered Nautilus* by Oliver Wendell Holmes. The outline for the study of the poem was prepared by Miss Ethel Carey of the Harbor Springs high school. The teacher's skill meets its severest test in the teaching of literature. We commend to teachers the outline here presented as a most successful effort to present a poem to a child to the end that he may get from it that which stamps the selection as literature. The method of treatment will serve in the study of poems in general.

Very respectfully,

Fred L. Keeler

Superintendent of Public Instruction.

THE CHAMBERED NAUTILUS

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,
Sails the unshadowed main,—
The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
In gulfs enchanted, where the siren sings,
And coral reefs lie bare,
Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair.

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;
Wrecked is the ship of pearl!
And every chambered cell,
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
Before thee lies revealed,—
Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

Year after year beheld the silent toil
That spread his lustrous coil;
Still, as the spiral grew,
He left the past year's dwelling for the new,
Stole with soft step its shining archway through,
Built up its idle door,
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old no more.

Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee,
Child of the wandering sea,
Cast from her lap, forlorn!
From thy dead lips a clearer note is born
Than ever Triton blew from wreathed horn!
While on mine ear it rings,
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings:—

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul, —
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!

A STUDY OF THE CHAMBERED NAUTILUS

BY ETHEL CAREY

Department of English, Harbor Springs High School

Upon reading a piece of literature we are not apt to think of the thought and work which the author has been obliged to put upon his book while composing it. It is so complete when it reaches our hands that we cannot conceive of it as ever being in any other form than that in which we see it when finished. Anything which we are able to read so easily and which runs along so smoothly must surely have rolled out from his pen with no effort whatever. We can hardly imagine that it has been revised and rewritten time and again, or realize that the very part we read with the greatest ease has, perhaps, cost him the most work. Indeed a writer generally tries to erase every sign of the struggle he has had in perfecting his work.

One of the first questions that arise after an author has chosen his subject, is the form into which he is going to mold his material so that he can best express himself and be most certain of holding the attention of his readers. If the subject deals with incidents, he feels no great anxiety for every one is apt to enjoy a story. Interest is kept alive by the unravelling of the plot in the succession of events. However, if the writer wishes to discuss his ideas on various subjects and to give his personal opinions and explanations, the problem of holding attention is more serious. Sometimes the mere word "essay" applied to a selection frightens people before they even look to see if they would like it.

Oliver Wendell Holmes enjoyed writing essays and knew that the public would enjoy what he had written if he could but catch their interest. He did this in a clever way. He was well acquainted with the fact that almost every one would read a story and would enjoy meeting new characters even though fictitious. He therefore invented a little plot. He introduced a gentleman who was living, for the time being, in a boarding house, and who, in turn, introduced the reader to the other boarders, reporting the life of the household, particularly the discussions carried on at the breakfast table. Holmes referred to this gentleman as the Autocrat because of his habit of leading all the conversations and arbitrarily settling any question of dispute. However, the Autocrat would often stop long enough, while making these reports, to comment confidentially on some peculiarity of one of the boarders, or give hints

concerning the progress of the romance between himself and the little school mistress. While these breakfast talks were mainly only the opinions of the Autocrat himself, they were presented in various ways as the answers to questions asked by the other members of the household in their general conversation, or the reports were sometimes quoted as the ideas which he had gained from his two friends, the Poet and the Professor, recalled by some remark at the table. In this way Holmes was able to give us his ideas by putting them in the mouth of the Autocrat, and in a way that was not tiresome. Even then the Autocrat warns his reader that his talks are like the breakfasts, sometimes dipped toast and sometimes dry, to be taken as they come.

Holmes was also a poet, so he represented the Autocrat as writing verse occasionally and reading it to illustrate a point he might be making. One morning at the table he read *The Chambered Nautilus*, after he had been explaining how many cases there were of things being similar. At first they might seem quite different until some great poet would point out a marked likeness. He said that he did not have time to stop and mention any particular example in literature. He was no doubt thinking of Burns' poem *To a Mouse*. In this, for instance, Burns shows that there is not so much difference, after all, between the destruction of the house of a little field mouse just as winter sets in, and the loss of an entire fortune by a man. Both had struggled to get their homes and supplies and both were equally outcasts. The Autocrat has seen an equally interesting comparison to be drawn from the nautilus.

He knew that many of the boarders were unacquainted with this animal, so he told them about it, since there would have been no use in trying to draw a comparison to it until they knew what it was. He explained to them that it was a little sea animal living in a small shell which it had built around itself. Becoming dissatisfied with the first room it would add a larger one to it and move in, closing the door into the first. A similar change would take place again and again for the nautilus was never content to remain in its present abode but continually built one after another, until at death, it would dwell in the best that it had ever made. Behind it would stretch the empty chambers from which it had stepped to something better, thus making the shell a spiral or cornucopia in shape. After the Autocrat had explained the habit of the nautilus, he asked if any one could see a lesson in this. Do you? He then read the poem.

PART ONE

Read the poem over again and again until you understand with what the Autocrat compared the nautilus. Pay close attention to the last stanza. What was the lesson the author wanted to teach from this little shellfish? What do you think of a person who is able to see such a beautiful and helpful lesson in any thing so small and common? Can you look about you at the every day things you know so well and get from them some helpful idea?

The poem as a whole, containing only five stanzas, may seem short when you think of the long stories in verse, like *Evangeline* or *Hiawatha*. This poem does not tell a story. It deals with a feeling found in almost every person. What feeling or longing is it? Because it does this, it is called *lyric poetry*. Any lyric poem has one central thought. What is the central thought in *The Chambered Nautilus*?

PART TWO

As you have read the poem you have noticed that it could be divided into two parts because of a marked change in thought between the first three and the last two stanzas. The first three stanzas deal with the nautilus, telling us about its appearance, its manner of living, where it was found, and referring to an old legend in connection with it. Until the poet has acquainted us with this little animal and has interested us in it, he does not want to introduce any higher ideas. When he has made us alive to its beauty by its poetical language, and has drawn us away from our sordid and prosaic thoughts, he then leads us to a more advanced idea and shows us besides a beautiful picture, a spiritual teaching.

It is only fair, then, to give a thorough study to this poem and find out the exact meaning of every word and line that we may better enjoy its whole beauty and get a clear understanding of its message. Clearly understanding a poem will never hurt our appreciation of it nor ought to lessen our enjoyment of its beauty. You may, for instance, enjoy reading the word "irised" (line 7, stanza two) without looking up its meaning. It is new and has a poetical sound which may delight you as you say it. However, if you remember at the same time the soft delicate colors of the rainbow as you have seen them traced on the inner surface of a sea shell, does the word "irised" lose any of its beauty? Remember this word the next time you break open a clam shell.

We will therefore make a careful study of first—

GROUP I

(Stanzas One, Two and Three)

The author had two clear pictures in his mind while making these stanzas. Try to get them just as clearly as if you had witnessed them with your own eyes. Imagine that he is talking with you, holding in his hand a little shell which had been washed up from some deep part of the ocean after the owner had left his house. As the writer of the poem looks down upon the shell, he imagines it as it was with its inmate alive, basing his ideas upon the old legend told of it. Try to see what he saw.

Stanza One—The Nautilus Alive

He speaks of the shell as a *ship of pearl* because he says that poets have always pretended that it was a fairy boat sailing over that part of the ocean never visited by ordinary ships and mortal men, a kind of ocean fairyland. Why did he call it a pearl ship? Why not just a wooden boat? What figure of speech has he employed? Can you see any reason for using the word "unshadowed"? In the imaginary picture you are making for yourself of this far-away place, is the glassy mirror of the sea dotted with steamers and fishing boats, or is it solitary? What right have you to imagine the place so? "Main" is a poetical word often used meaning *sea*.

The old fairy stories go on to say that this little boat would raise a purple sail when it started out. What do you imagine would be the texture of that sail? Why should the sail of a boat be likened to a wing? Again what figure of speech is used? Why should such a ship be called venturous? In what kind of writing have you read before the word "bark" for ship? Evidently this enchanted place is in the tropics. What makes you think so? Why did not the poet imagine it to be in the Arctic regions? Who were the sirens? (See mythology.) Why should they live in an enchanted gulf? Can you see in your picture the sea nymphs with their flowing hair, sunning themselves on the coral reefs? Read up about coral reefs if you have forgotten, so that you will be seeing what the author saw. If you could touch these maidens as they rise dripping from the sea, would they be warm or cold?

Do not be satisfied until you can see the picture of the sea. How would the wind feel on your face? What smell would be wafted to you? Is it a place where you would like to stay or would you be anxious to get back to a workaday world?

In this stanza has the poet forgotten once that he is imagining the shell in his hand to be a fairy boat? Go through the stanza and note what words he uses to preserve his figure of speech throughout.

Stanza Two—The Dead Nautilus

He is still thinking of the fairy boat in the next two lines. Is it still sailing the enchanted sea as he now thinks of it? Where is it? To what does he again liken the sail? Why does he use the adjective "living"? How does the word "wrecked" help the metaphor more than "destroyed" or "abandoned" would have?

After the first two lines there is a change in the comparison and the author imagines the shell to be a house with a number of rooms. Why is this a good metaphor to draw? What words in this stanza and the next prove that he now thought of the shell as a residence? Is there a happy air about the little home as if the owner was busy and contented within? How does the author convey his impression to you? The nautilus is a very low form of life like the oyster, its whole existence being spent within the closed rooms of its shell. Why are "dim dreaming" good words to use, then? What other words in the stanza refer to the soft light within the house?

By using the word, "crypt," the quiet darkened home of the nautilus is compared to what? What does "unsealed" indicate concerning its frail tenant?

Stanza Three—The Building of the House

Many of us, upon picking up a shell, never think of it as the result of the toil of a little animal which has built it and made it not only a shelter but a beautiful one. Now that the poet has pointed it out to you, will you not have a different feeling for other shells? If you are sure that you understand the manner in which the nautilus built its home, write it out in your own words. Compare it with Holmes' description. Both tell the truth. Which tells it in the pleasanter way and which reveals the greater beauty? What other word besides "coil" not mentioned before might be used to give an equally good description of the appearance of the house? What part of the shell do "lustrous" and "shining" help to emphasize again? As you read this over are there any words you think particularly well used here? Why? Do the words "noisy" and "boisterous" seem to apply to this verse? Give reasons. Explain the last line.

GROUP II

(Stanzas Four and Five)

The author is now ready to bring in a higher thought, for the good we derive from any thing is greater than our appreciation of its beauty. He now addresses the spirit of the dead nautilus which had lived in the shell. What figure of speech is this?

Stanza Four—Thanks for the Message

In this stanza he expresses his thanks for the lesson which has been taught since he feels anxious to copy its example. Why is the idea of the nautilus being "a child of the sea" a good one? Does the adjective "forlorn" remind you of any feeling excited in you for this animal in any other stanza? Which one? Why should the silent toil speak more clearly than a horn blown by Triton? Find out who Triton was. Why was his horn "wreathed?" See if there is anything in the story to have turned the poet's mind to deep hollow caves for he now speaks of the distant part of his mind resembling a cave from which he seems to get a message telling him the lesson taught by the nautilus. So plain is it that it seems like an inner voice speaking to him.

Stanza Five—Message

This contains the message which he hears. He is told to profit by the example of the nautilus, for he, too, is a builder constructing a soul. Instead, then, of never trying to improve, he should always be trying to grow into something better. The poet takes the message only to himself but it applies to all of us. We ought to see greater possibilities ahead of us and strive to grow into the new self we desire to be, never being satisfied unless aiming at something more. We can never reach perfection for earthly life necessarily covers us like a temple, yet we do not need to remain in a small, dark, narrow room. Though we must be shut away from heaven for a time we are all able to make a larger room for ourselves as the little shellfish did. Instead of being confined in a low prison with slanting roofs we may dwell in a spacious, airy chamber, whose ceiling is a vast dome instead of a cramped gable. Such a dwelling place was obtained by the nautilus through perseverance and Holmes tells us we can do the same for ourselves if we want to try. Finally the nautilus was free from all bondage and left its shell by the sea, so the poet says we will finally be able to cast aside even the confinement of a great temple and reach true perfection after death.

What is the new metaphor in this stanza? Who is the builder now? What is compared to a temple? Why is "stately" a better adjective than "larger"? Explain "swift seasons." What noun must you supply after "past" to complete the idea? What is there in the word "unresting" which helps the comparison of life to a sea?

If Holmes had been content to show us only the beauty of the shell and tell us the legend, could he have used the last stanza with any effect? Show how the third stanza is the connecting link of the poem.

Now that you have finished studying the poem in this way, would you add or subtract anything from it? Try, and see what would happen.

One of Holmes' critics has said that it was complete. What reasons do you suppose he would give for this?

Any really great poem always sets forth some ideal which we can all take for our own and profit by. It gives us some aim in life for which to strive and become better by the effort. It is because *The Chambered Nautilus* possesses this characteristic that it has survived. Otherwise it would have been lost. We are hardly able to appreciate the great good which has been done to the world by the ideals which the poets have set forth. All of them do not find their lessons in simple nature. Oliver Wendell Holmes did, and whether he brought us a new idea, or only expressed a thought which we had half formed in our minds and could not find the words to describe, we are equally indebted. We should learn to appreciate the fact that literature holds not only this one ennobling poem but many, and by studying them see what literature can do for us.

PART THREE

In rewriting the third stanza you undoubtedly found that your paragraph was far from being as good as Holmes' stanza. The thought, of course, was the same. Perhaps you said that it did not sound so well. One reason for this was because yours was in prose while Holmes wrote in poetry. Some one has said that when an idea is in prose, it is in its everyday dress, while if it has been written in poetry, it has put on its best dress. We all know why our best clothes are more beautiful than our everyday ones. Let us now try to see if we can find some of the secrets which made Holmes' poem so much more beautiful than our attempt. We have already granted him our admiration for drawing such a helpful idea from so common a thing as a sea shell. Let us try to see what means he employed to dress up the thought so that it would not only help the reader but delight him by the beautiful way in which it was told. We are all justified in liking beautiful things. We want to learn to appreciate only the best that our admiration may not be wasted on anything inferior.

Figures of Speech¹—By going through the poem as we have just studied it, we found that the idea was helped by comparisons or figures of speech. What figure predominated? We found also, that certain words seemed to fit exactly the particular places given them. Some of the words pleased us because they were unusual. Go through the poem and pick out the words that you are sure would occur only in poetry. Do not even omit the title. Try substituting the equivalent prose word and see the effect.

¹See page 14.

Rhythm—The rhythm also helps to make the poem beautiful. Who has not, in hearing music, caught himself beating time? The poet makes use of this feeling in us and is careful to arrange his accented and unaccented syllables according to a regular plan having them recur regularly. We do not like it if they do not. Try reading line five, stanza four. How do you pronounce “wreathed” so that the line has a musical swing? How many syllables must it have in order to preserve the rhythm? The person who reads in a singsong way emphasizes the accent too much, but to test the rhythm read it in that way, tapping heavily with your pencil when the accented syllables occur. Notice in line four, stanza five, that the first syllable is light and the second stressed. Notice also that the scheme is repeated five times in the line. The plan changes for other lines. Find a different one. Test the poem and see if the same kind of a line has been used in the same position in each of the five stanzas. After reading the poem aloud which of the following words would you say described the movement of the poem?

Smooth, slow, dignified, stately, solemn;
 Light, swift, impetuous, rippling, rollicking;
 Easy, graceful, spirited, powerful, regular;
 Varied, irregular, uneven, halting.¹

Rhyme—Besides rhythm we also like rhyme, that is, the use of words having a similar sound as in stanza one:—

Feign, a	Flings, b	Bare, c
Main, a	Wings, b	Hair, c
	Sings, b	

Does the same rhyme plan, aa bbb cc, prevail in each stanza?

Alliteration—Another thing which you may not have realized that you enjoyed, was the use of a number of words beginning with the same sound. It is a taste inherited from our Anglo Saxon forefathers. We call such a choice of words “alliteration.” Think of the names of your friends and see how many have the same initial for both given and family name. Which is the more euphonious name, “Belle Norton” or “Nora Norton”? Find the number of times Holmes has tried to please our ear by this device.

Sound Suggests Sense—The sound of a word also helps to hint at sense sometimes. Would you not be able to get an idea of the difference in the action by merely hearing the words “roll” and “rent”? Can you find other examples in the poem?

At times the sound of a whole line suggests its meaning. Did the sound of stanza three help to give a quieting effect? The soft “S” is always used in hushing a noise. Does it appear often in this part of the poem? Compare the sound and swing of *The Chambered Nautilus* with

¹How to Study Literature—B. A. Heydrick.

the movement of *Marching Through Georgia*. Does the meaning seem to fit the rhythm in each case? Would it do to interchange the words?

These are some of the means by which Holmes has "dressed up" his lesson so that you enjoy reading it. Does it not help in your appreciation of it to understand, not only the meaning, but also its beauty? Will you not be glad to remember the same things in connection with your next poem, and like it all the better for your knowledge of them?

PART FOUR

Practice reading the poem aloud until you are able to convey its exact meaning. Learn the entire poem. The last stanza is said by some critics to be the best known stanza in American literature.

(Suggestion to the Teacher—Look up the various members of the boarding house and become acquainted with the landlady, her children, the young man whom they call John, the gentleman opposite, etc. Assign a character to the various pupils and let them sit about a table. Then as a recognition of good work let the best reader impersonate the Autocrat and give *The Chambered Nautilus*. It will make an interesting class exercise for the lesson concluding this classic.)

PART FIVE

Have you now enough interest in the poem to want to know more of the man who wrote it? You will be glad to find out that there is a particular reason why we Americans should be proud of him. If you would like to know more about him look up his life.

A sketch of the life of Oliver Wendell Holmes will be found in the following books:

Introduction to American Literature, Brander Matthews, American Book Co.

American Literature, Wm. J. Long, Ginn & Co.

American Literature, Julian W. Abernathy, Chas. E. Merrill Co.

American Literature for Secondary Schools, Wm. B. Cairns, The Macmillan Company.

A History of American Literature, Fred L. Pattee, Silver, Burdett & Co.

Introduction to American Literature, F. V. N. Painter, Sibley & Co.

An Introduction to American Literature, Henry S. Pancoast, Henry Holt & Co.

American Literature, Wm. C. Lawton, World Book Co.

Studies in American Literature, Chas. Noble, The Macmillan Co.

Holmes' The Chambered Nautilus, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Speech, Lucy A. Sloan, Sloan Publishing Co.

The Chambered Nautilus and Gettysburg Speech, Educational Publishing Co.

FIGURES OF SPEECH

Figures of speech are variations of the ordinary forms of expression which make the thought more attractive or striking. We explain below the more common figures.

Simile.—A figure of speech which makes a comparison between two things that are very different in their nature, but which are alike in some respects, by asserting one is like the other.

Example: He was like a *lion* in the fight.

Metaphor.—A figure of speech which makes a comparison between two things that are very different in their nature, but which are alike in some respects, (1) by asserting one is the other; or (2) by speaking of it as if it were the other.

Examples: 1. He was a *lion* in the fight.

2. The ship *plows* the sea.

Personification.—A figure of speech in which (1) an idea or thing is represented as a living being; or (2) an animal is represented as a person.

Examples: 1. The wind *howled*.

2. The dog *laughed*.

Apostrophe.—Apostrophe is direct address to the absent as if they were present; to the dead as if they were living; or to things as if they had life.

Example: O *Death*, where is thy sting? O *Grave*, where is thy victory?

BOOKS ESPECIALLY HELPFUL IN TEACHING READING AND
LITERATURE

What Can Literature Do for Me? by C. Alphonso Smith, Doubleday,
Page & Co.

Famous Poems Explained, Waitman Barbe, Hinds, Noble & Eldredge.

English in the Country School, Walter Barnes, Row, Peterson & Co.

Literature in the Common Schools, John Harrington Cox, Little
Brown & Co.

Reading in Public Schools, Briggs & Coffman, Row, Peterson & Co.

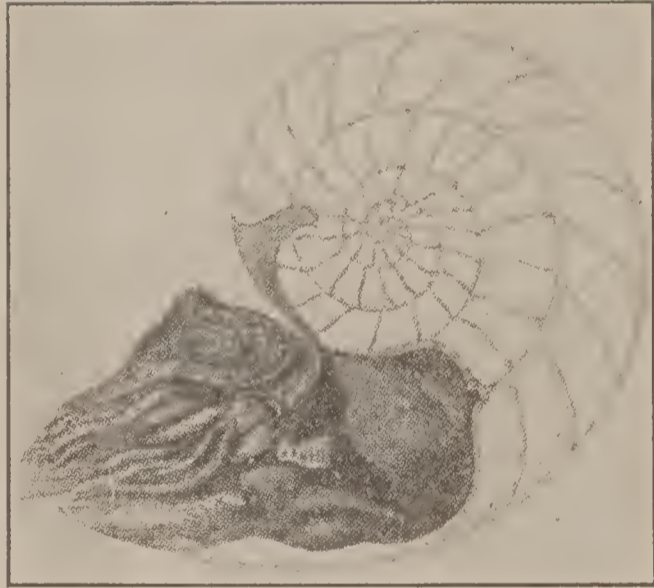
Teaching Children to Read, Paul Clapper, D. Appleton & Co.

Literature in the School, John S. Welch, Silver, Burdett & Co.

Method and Methods in the Teaching of English, I. E. Goldwasser,
D. C. Heath & Co.

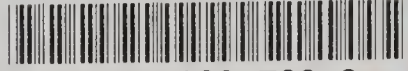
How to Study Literature, B. A. Heydrick, Hinds, Noble & Eldredge.

Intensive Studies in American Literature, Alma Blount, Macmillan
Company.



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